DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 566 CS 012 754

AUTHOR O'Brien, David G.; And Others
TITLE Engaging "At-Risk" High School Students. Perspectives in Reading Research No. 12.
INSTITUTION National Reading Research Center, Athens, GA.; National Reading Research Center, College Park, MD.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 97
CONTRACT 117A20007
NOTE 27p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basic Writing; Computer Uses in Education; Definitions; *High Risk Students; High Schools; *High School Students; Labeling (of Persons); Program Descriptions; *Remedial Programs; *Remedial Reading; *Student Centered Curriculum; *Student Interests
IDENTIFIERS Student Disengagement; Tippecanoe School Corporation IN

ABSTRACT

At-risk students' failure within the system and the failure of the system to stimulate and interest them leads to a cycle of disengagement: since they lack competence, these students avoid reading. The term "at-risk" is ambiguous because of the evolution of its meaning and the different loci of blame for how people "become at risk" or are "placed at risk." A literacy lab, replacing a traditional remedial reading program at Lafayette (Indiana) Jefferson High School, was based on 3 characteristics of innovative secondary literacy programs: (1) viewing students as unique individuals; (2) providing students with tasks that are challenging, interesting, and "do-able"; and (3) allowing students choice in topic and method of completing activities. Text-based activities are integrated with other media, including a variety of computer-based, multimedia activities. Academic history interviews of 10 students and 3 case studies provide insight about the students' current family and work lives, future aspirations, experiences in school, and the values and beliefs these individuals hold regarding life within and outside of school. All students in the Literacy Lab but one found the activities to be enjoyable and helpful in their development as readers and writers. Students especially liked the computer activities in which they could read and write stories. The Literacy Lab maintains students' engagement from day to day by capitalizing on their free choice and balancing their daily challenges and success by using technology tools typically reserved for high track, more privileged students. (Contains 41 references.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 405 566

Engaging "At-Risk" High School Students

David G. O'Brien
Deborah R. Dillon
Stephen A. Wellinski
Purdue University

Rebecca Springs
David Stith
Lafayette Jefferson High School

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS 012754

NRRC National Reading Research Center

PERSPECTIVES IN READING RESEARCH NO. 12
Winter 1997

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

NRRC

National Reading Research Center

Engaging "At-Risk" High School Students

David G. O'Brien
Deborah R. Dillon
Stephen A. Wellinski
Purdue University

Rebecca Springs
David Stith
Lafayette Jefferson High School

PERSPECTIVES IN READING RESEARCH NO. 12
Winter 1997

The work reported herein is a National Reading Research Center Project of the University of Georgia and University of Maryland. It was supported under the Educational Research and Development Centers Program (PR/AWARD NO. 117A20007) as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the National Reading Research Center, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, or the U.S. Department of Education.

NRRC National Reading Research Center

Executive Committee
Donna E. Alvermann, Co-Director
University of Georgia
John T. Guthrie, Co-Director
University of Maryland College Park
James F. Baumann, Associate Director
University of Georgia
Patricia S. Koskinen, Associate Director
University of Maryland College Park
Jamie Lynn Metsala, Associate Director
University of Maryland College Park
Penny Oldfather
University of Georgia
John F. O'Flahavan
University of Maryland College Park
James V. Hoffman
University of Texas at Austin
Cynthia R. Hynd
University of Georgia
Robert Serpell
University of Maryland Baltimore County
Betty Shockley-Bisplinghoff
Clarke County School District, Athens, Georgia
Linda DeGroff
University of Georgia

Publications Editors

Research Reports and Perspectives
Linda DeGroff, Editor
University of Georgia
James V. Hoffman, Associate Editor
University of Texas at Austin
Mariam Jean Dreher, Associate Editor
University of Maryland College Park
Instructional Resources
Lee Galda, *University of Georgia*
Research Highlights
William G. Holliday
University of Maryland College Park
Policy Briefs
James V. Hoffman
University of Texas at Austin
Videos
Shawn M. Glynn, *University of Georgia*

NRRC Staff
Barbara F. Howard, Office Manager
Kathy B. Davis, Senior Secretary
University of Georgia

Barbara A. Neitzey, Administrative Assistant
Valerie Tyra, Accountant
University of Maryland College Park

National Advisory Board
Phyllis W. Aldrich
Saratoga Warren Board of Cooperative Educational Services, Saratoga Springs, New York
Arthur N. Applebee
State University of New York, Albany
Ronald S. Brandt
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
Marshá T. DeLain
Delaware Department of Public Instruction
Carl A. Grant
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Barbara McCombs
Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory (MCREL)
Luis C. Moll
University of Arizona
Carol M. Santa
School District No. 5
Kalispell, Montana
Anne P. Sweet
Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education
Louise Cherry Wilkinson
Rutgers University
Peter Winograd
University of Kentucky

Production Editor
Katherine P. Hutchison
University of Georgia

Assistant Production Editor
Jennifer Moon
University of Georgia

Dissemination Coordinator
Jordana E. Rich
University of Georgia

Text Formatter
Angela R. Wilson
University of Georgia

NRRC - University of Georgia
318 Aderhold
University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia 30602-7125
(706) 542-3674 Fax: (706) 542-3678
INTERNET: NRRC@uga.cc.uga.edu

NRRC - University of Maryland College Park
3216 J. M. Patterson Building
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland 20742
(301) 405-8035 Fax: (301) 314-9625
INTERNET: NRRC@umail.umd.edu

About the National Reading Research Center

The National Reading Research Center (NRRC) is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education to conduct research on reading and reading instruction. The NRRC is operated by a consortium of the University of Georgia and the University of Maryland College Park in collaboration with researchers at several institutions nationwide.

The NRRC's mission is to discover and document those conditions in homes, schools, and communities that encourage children to become skilled, enthusiastic, lifelong readers. NRRC researchers are committed to advancing the development of instructional programs sensitive to the cognitive, sociocultural, and motivational factors that affect children's success in reading. NRRC researchers from a variety of disciplines conduct studies with teachers and students from widely diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 classrooms. Research projects deal with the influence of family and family-school interactions on the development of literacy; the interaction of sociocultural factors and motivation to read; the impact of literature-based reading programs on reading achievement; the effects of reading strategies instruction on comprehension and critical thinking in literature, science, and history; the influence of innovative group participation structures on motivation and learning; the potential of computer technology to enhance literacy; and the development of methods and standards for alternative literacy assessments.

The NRRC is further committed to the participation of teachers as full partners in its research. A better understanding of how teachers view the development of literacy, how they use knowledge from research, and how they approach change in the classroom is crucial to improving instruction. To further this understanding, the NRRC conducts school-based research in which teachers explore their own philosophical and pedagogical orientations and trace their professional growth.

Dissemination is an important feature of NRRC activities. Information on NRRC research appears in several formats. *Research Reports* communicate the results of original research or synthesize the findings of several lines of inquiry. They are written primarily for researchers studying various areas of reading and reading instruction. The *Perspective Series* presents a wide range of publications, from calls for research and commentary on research and practice to first-person accounts of experiences in schools. *Instructional Resources* include curriculum materials, instructional guides, and materials for professional growth, designed primarily for teachers.

For more information about the NRRC's research projects and other activities, or to have your name added to the mailing list, please contact:

Donna E. Alvermann, Co-Director
National Reading Research Center
318 Aderhold Hall
University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602-7125
(706) 542-3674

John T. Guthrie, Co-Director
National Reading Research Center
3216 J. M. Patterson Building
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742
(301) 405-8035

NRRC Editorial Review Board

Peter Afflerbach
University of Maryland College Park

Jane Agee
University of Georgia

JoBeth Allen
University of Georgia

Janice F. Almasi
University of Buffalo–SUNY

Patty Anders
University of Arizona

Harriette Arrington
University of Kentucky

Marlia Banning
University of Utah

Jill Bartoli
Elizabethtown College

Eurydice Bauer
University of Georgia

Janet Benton
Bowling Green, Kentucky

Irene Blum
Pine Springs Elementary School
Falls Church, Virginia

David Bloome
Vanderbilt University

John Borkowski
Notre Dame University

Fenice Boyd
University of Georgia

Karen Bromley
Binghamton University

Martha Carr
University of Georgia

Suzanne Clewell
Montgomery County Public Schools
Rockville, Maryland

Joan Coley
Western Maryland College

Michelle Commeyras
University of Georgia

Linda Cooper
Shaker Heights City Schools
Shaker Heights, Ohio

Karen Costello
Connecticut Department of Education
Hartford, Connecticut

Jim Cunningham
Gibsonville, North Carolina

Karin Dahl
Ohio State University

Marcia Delany
Wilkes County Public Schools
Washington, Georgia

Lynne Diaz-Rico
California State University-San Bernardino

Mark Dressman
New Mexico State University

Ann Duffy
University of Georgia

Ann Egan-Robertson
Amherst College

Jim Flood
San Diego State University

Dana Fox
University of Arizona

Linda Gambrell
University of Maryland College Park

Mary Graham
McLean, Virginia

Rachel Grant
University of Maryland College Park

Barbara Guzzetti
Arizona State University

Frances Hancock
Concordia College of Saint Paul,
Minnesota

Kathleen Heubach
Virginia Commonwealth University

Sally Hudson-Ross
University of Georgia

Cynthia Hynd
University of Georgia

Gay Ivey
University of Georgia

David Jardine
University of Calgary

Robert Jimenez
University of Oregon

Michelle Kelly
University of Utah

James King
University of South Florida

Kate Kirby
Georgia State University

Linda Labbo
University of Georgia

Michael Law
University of Georgia

Donald T. Leu
Syracuse University

Susan Lytle
University of Pennsylvania

Bert Mangino
Las Vegas, Nevada

Susan Mazzoni
Baltimore, Maryland

Ann Dacey McCann
University of Maryland College Park

Sarah McCarthey
University of Texas at Austin

Veda McClain
University of Georgia

Lisa McFalls
University of Georgia

Randy McGinnis
University of Maryland

Mike McKenna
Georgia Southern University

Barbara Michalove
Fourth Street Elementary School
Athens, Georgia

Elizabeth B. Moje
University of Utah

Lesley Morrow
Rutgers University

Bruce Murray
Auburn University

Susan Neuman
Temple University

John O'Flahavan
University of Maryland College Park

Marilyn Ohlhausen-McKinney
University of Nevada

Penny Oldfather
University of Georgia

Barbara M. Palmer
Mount Saint Mary's College

Stephen Phelps
Buffalo State College

Mike Pickle
Georgia Southern University

Amber T. Prince
Berry College

Gaoyin Qian
Lehman College–CUNY

Tom Reeves
University of Georgia

Lenore Ringler
New York University

Mary Roe
University of Delaware

Nadeen T. Ruiz
California State University-
Sacramento

Olivia Saracho
University of Maryland College Park

Paula Schwanenflugel
University of Georgia

Robert Serpell
University of Maryland Baltimore
County

Betty Shockley-Bisplinghoff
Barnett Shoals Elementary School
Athens, Georgia

Wayne H. Slater
University of Maryland College Park

Margaret Smith
Las Vegas, Nevada

Susan Sonnenschein
University of Maryland Baltimore
County

Bernard Spodek
University of Illinois

Bettie St. Pierre
University of Georgia

Steve Stahl
University of Georgia

Roger Stewart
Boise State University

Anne P. Sweet
Office of Educational Research
and Improvement

Louise Tomlinson
University of Georgia

Bruce VanSledright
University of Maryland College Park

Barbara Walker
Eastern Montana University–Billings

Louise Waynant
Prince George's County Schools
Upper Marlboro, Maryland

Dera Weaver
Athens Academy
Athens, Georgia

Jane West
Agnes Scott College

Renee Weisburg
Elkins Park, Pennsylvania

Allan Wigfield
University of Maryland College Park

Shelley Wong
University of Maryland College Park

Josephine Peyton Young
University of Georgia

Hallie Yopp
California State University

About the Authors

David O'Brien received a Ph.D. in Reading Education at the University of Georgia in 1984. He is currently Associate Professor of Literacy and Language at Purdue University where he teaches courses in secondary literacy and qualitative research methods. His research interests are content literacy, particularly from a school cultural perspective. During the past four years he has collaborated with school-based colleagues to design an innovative program for at-risk learners and to study the students' literacy engagement within that program.

Deborah Dillon is Associate Professor of Literacy and Language and Associate Dean for Research and Development in the School of Education, Purdue University. She received her Ph.D. in Reading Education from the University of Georgia in 1985. Her primary research interest is studying teaching, learning, and assessment as they are embedded in the social and political contexts of schooling. Most recently, she has worked as part of the collaborative team of literacy faculty members and school based colleagues to construct and study a new literacy curriculum for preservice teachers.

Stephen Wellinski recently received a master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Purdue University and is continuing graduate work in secondary literacy. He is particularly interested in transitions from school to work and designing secondary programs that accommodate the interests of students entering vocational-technical programs or the workplace after high school graduation.

Rebecca Springs is a high school English teacher at Lafayette Jefferson High School, Lafayette, Indiana. She co-ordinates the Literacy Lab program for at-risk high students. She received a master's degree from Purdue University with a focus on reading and has taught reading and speech at Jefferson High for 12 years. Rebecca also teaches preservice teachers at Purdue University as an adjunct instructor for the secondary literacy course.

David Stith is a high school English teacher at Lafayette Jefferson High School. He received a master's degree from Purdue University and has spent most of his teaching career working with students who are behind in reading. Dave is currently co-coordinator of the Jefferson High Literacy Lab and serves as an adjunct instructor in the secondary literacy program at Purdue.

National Reading Research Center
Universities of Georgia and Maryland
Perspectives in Reading Research No. 12
Winter 1997

Engaging "At-Risk" High School Students

David G. O'Brien
Deborah R. Dillon
Stephen A. Wellinski
Purdue University

Rebecca Springs
David Stith
Lafayette Jefferson High School

Abstract. *High school students often lack the literacy skills needed to succeed in school (Alvermann & Guthrie, 1993; Alvermann & Moore, 1991) or to contribute as productive citizens in the workplace beyond high school (Mikulecky & Drew, 1991). The subset of so-called "at-risk" students face even more challenges. Because they lack competence, these students avoid reading. Even the more competent readers who can read choose not to (Foertsch, 1992; Guthrie, Bennett, & McGough, 1994). Hence, students seldom engage in reading for the variety of purposes for which it could serve them. This cycle of disinterest and lack of competence costs the U.S. billions of dollars in lost productivity, social programs, and incarceration, particularly when students become disenfranchised with school and drop out (Garcia & de Felix, 1995). Ironically, students' disenfranchisement from school is often attributed to the inadequacies they bring to school rather than the inadequacies of the school in meeting their needs. Below, we will explore perspectives on the relation between at-riskness and literacy engagement.*

Perspectives on At-Riskness and Literacy Engagement

In high school classrooms, reading and writing are tied to teacher-directed content coverage of material in bland textbooks (Boyer, 1983; Tyson-Bernstein, 1988). Instruction with textbooks often takes the form of teacher lecture of the text content or as recitation sessions (Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1990; O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995). Textbooks, which students seldom view as interesting, include selected knowledge framed as legitimate and presented in ways that restrict how the knowledge is taught, presented, or discussed (Apple, 1988; Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991). For average or above average achievers, literacy skills represent avenues to achieve tightly structured goals of various subject area classrooms. For at-risk students, the typical literacy

tasks represent an inflexible system in which they have failed for many years.

At-risk students' failure within the system and the failure of the system to stimulate and interest them leads to a cycle of *disengagement*: Since they lack competence, these students avoid reading. Even the more competent readers who do not read are convinced that it is not useful in their daily lives and seldom engage in reading for the variety of purposes for which it could serve them.

Schools unwittingly contribute to this problem by failing to attend to the needs of students with low literacy attainment or aliteracy. Instead, schools assign categorical classifications and put students in special programs that fail to help them (Allington, 1994). For example, elementary- grade students who fail in reading in early grades are likely to remain behind in reading throughout school (Juel, 1988). Low achievers, who often initially struggle with reading and are placed in special programs, are not only unlikely to improve in their achievement but remedial programs may actually exacerbate the problem (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1993).

At-risk learners are often persons who have been identified because of low literacy attainment. This identification is made because literacy ability influences a range of school performances. Once identified, however, it is apparent to most educators that high school students who have trouble with literacy tasks evidence a range of other problems tied to complex factors. The concept of at-riskness is a vague catch-all of such complex factors.

The term *at-risk* is ambiguous because of the evolution of its meaning and the different loci of blame for how people "become at risk" or are "placed at risk." Some perspectives on "at-riskness" suggest that students have characteristics that *predispose* them to being at risk. Other definitions suggest that the settings in which students are schooled *place* them at risk (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1993; Waxman, 1992). We explain each of these below.

Perspectives That Target the Students and Their Families

Since the beginning of compulsory education, parents and families of low achieving students (today's at-risk students) have been blamed for failing to provide their children with adequate motivation, character, and ability for school success (Cuban, 1989). This simplistic, severe position has evolved into one in which parents are not always blamed directly. Nevertheless, schools excuse themselves by assigning labels for categories and etiologies that focus on predisposed problems at-risk students have inherited, developed, or acquired outside of school (Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; Ralph, 1989).

For example, at-risk students have been defined as persons predisposed to failure in school and at risk of dropping out of school because they (a) are educationally disadvantaged, exhibit low achievement, and have trouble adapting to school; (b) show outward signs of distress and failure due to alcohol and drug abuse, unwed pregnancy, attempted suicide, crime, delinquency or truancy; (c) are children of urban poor backgrounds or persons who belong to racial minorities which have been recognized historically as problematic to

the larger society and particularly needy in terms of education and special resources (Cuban, 1989); and (d) have genetic or psychological inadequacies in their preschool lives that predispose them to failure in school (Bitting, Cordeiro, & Baptiste, 1992). If students, because of any of the above factors, are *predisposed* to failure and eventually fail, they may drop out of school because of low achievement, particularly in literacy (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1993; Ralph, 1989).

The perception that "at-riskness" resides within students serves to narrowly define a problem that is often addressed through special program placements and labels that stigmatize students (Bitting et al., 1992). A more optimistic definition is one that looks at at-riskness in terms of factors in school that educators can control. One way to focus this optimism is to locate the problems of at-risk students in the school culture.

Perspectives That Target Schools

In order to help at-risk students, educators must be willing to entertain the notion of *at-risk school environments* (Waxman, 1993). Schools with such environments can be characterized by a host of factors that alienate students, the most significant being educators and programs that are unresponsive to students' current needs in school as well as their future needs beyond high school. Furthermore, in order to define at-riskness in a way that prompts change, educators need to consciously avoid being deluded by the labels assigned to at-risk students and special programs. Instead, educators need to look at each student as unique within the school context (Donmoyer & Kos, 1993).

Educators, who represent dominant middle-class values, sometimes single out children who are not of the predominant class and stifle their self-esteem while neglecting the strengths that these students bring to school (Cuban, 1989). Indeed, schools have institutionalized such a low level of tolerance for differences among students that even minor deviations result in students being labeled as having personal deficits (Pugach, 1995). In addition, educators need to look at schools within the context of the communities in which they reside. When schools are viewed within community contexts, it is clear that social groups in school are, in part, established by social class differences in the larger community (Eckert, 1989). These differences are cemented in the social structure and reward system of schools.

In sum, schools cannot shoulder the blame because some students come to school ill-equipped to succeed. Nevertheless, schools can creatively solve problems related to how they perpetuate at-riskness and work to make fundamental changes that ensure the success of at-risk students. Unfortunately, institutionalized values and practices make change very difficult. In constructing a program for at-risk high school students, we focused on what a school *can* do to accommodate these students and ensure their success.

Constructing an Innovative Program

As a precursor to constructing a new program, we reviewed literature on traditional and exemplary secondary literacy programs, work

critiquing current programs for at-risk students, and work informing literacy engagement with a focus on achievement motivation, self-efficacy, attribution and goal theory, and constructivist perspectives on learning. The findings from that corpus, along with our own research over the last three years in which we have been testing ongoing assumptions, lead to the identification of three characteristics of innovative secondary literacy programs.

1. *Students must be understood as unique individuals who live in the broader community*. In order to teach at-risk students, it is imperative that educators know who these students are (Brause & Mayher, 1991; Dillon, 1989). Instead of labeling students or assigning blame to the students or their families for students' literacy challenges, we need to better understand the school, family, and community contexts associated with students at risk of failing or dropping out of school. This understanding helps educators understand students' lives and why they fail (Edwards & Young, 1992; Stevens & Price, 1992).

2. *Instructional tasks must be challenging enough to be interesting, yet flexible enough to provide students leverage in controlling the level of difficulty* (Covington, 1992). Tasks should be flexible, leading to systematic rewards for process and creativity over product. These tasks are antithetical to the low-incentive, high-risk, competitive, ability-based tasks valued in the predominant school culture (e.g., Nicholls, 1989). On the flexible tasks, students should work at their ability levels, be consistently challenged, and allowed to succeed daily.

3. *Students should be given more autonomy in choosing what they work on and how they approach tasks*. Changing the basic school cultural values that stress content coverage and teacher control to more student choice and autonomy can lead to increased engagement (Kohn, 1993; McCombs, 1996). A constructivist perspective on learning recognizes the importance of student autonomy and control (e.g., von Glasersfeld, 1991) and social constructivist research shows the importance of classroom agendas jointly constructed by students and teachers (Dillon, O'Brien, & Ruhl, 1989). Curiosity and interest should provide motivation to practice literacy processes that lead to efficacy, aesthetic enjoyment, and success. Ultimately, if students can exercise choice, the control they feel from being successful will lead to increased achievement and more active involvement in their schooling (Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991 [Turner, 1995 #34]). Additionally, students should have an authentic purpose for engaging in literacy tasks. Providing students an opportunity to discuss why they are learning the things they do is crucial to establishing the relevance of school (Nicholls & Hazzard, 1993).

The purpose of our ongoing project is to create a motivating and intellectually challenging curriculum for at-risk adolescents and identify components of the innovative program that are most effective in enhancing literacy engagement. The focus of this paper is to (a) discuss how the three characteristics previously outlined have been articulated in the innovative program, using examples of students' actions and products within the program; and (b) present students' perspectives on the program

activities and how they see these activities contributing to their literacy development.

Lafayette Jefferson High School Literacy Lab

The Lafayette Jefferson High School Literacy Lab, the site of the innovative program, is located in Jefferson High School, a large, comprehensive school that enrolls about 2,200 students. The students come from families representing a range of socioeconomic levels and working backgrounds. The community, with a population of about 50,000, is economically stable due to a diversity of small- to medium-sized manufacturing plants. The community also includes a considerable number of white-collar jobs associated with various service professions and businesses.

The Literacy Lab was created by a team of high school and university teacher-researchers who decided to replace a traditional remedial reading program. The staffing resources in the Literacy Lab determine the number of students enrolled. There is room for a maximum of 120 students (about 15 students per class period in a block-8 schedule) to maintain the current teacher-student ratio of about one teacher per eight students. The staffing includes one teacher, Rebecca, who works full-time in the lab and a second teacher, Dave, who works two class periods a day in the lab. Typically, two special education inclusion teachers work in the lab one class period every six days and one of the university teacher-researchers, David, teaches and does research in the lab an average of three periods per day, three days per week. A second university teacher-researcher, Deborah, and three research assistants have focused on the collection and analysis of various types of data, most recently on constructing academic and life histories of students enrolled in the lab.

Sixteen networked computers and several other stand-alone machines are set up as multimedia workstations. The computers are set up around the perimeter of the room with a shared laser printer in one corner. Tables that seat 4 to 6 students are arranged in the inner portion of the room where students can work in small groups or on individual projects. Classes meet for 92 min each day in a block-8 configuration (each student is in the lab every other day). The atmosphere of the lab reflects mutual respect among teachers and students and genuine desire on the part of teachers for students to succeed. Nevertheless, there is also a business-like tone; students come in and begin their work after brief socializing. As teachers, we move around the room helping students on computers or guiding small groupwork. Once the students are engaged in their tasks, they perceive that class periods pass quickly.

The Literacy Lab Curriculum

In the lab, text-based activities are integrated with other media, including a variety of computer-based, multimedia activities. These activities are designed to foster student engagement. Students select activities from a generic menu and contract to complete each activity selected over a period of time compatible with the difficulty of the task; we also offer more latitude in completing work than students typically receive in other classes. Students may choose to work on tasks in small groups with members of their choice or individually. At

least once a week students engage in lessons structured around lesson organizers like DR-TAs (Stauffer, 1969), REQUEST (Manzo, 1968), K-W-L (Ogle, 1986), and Guided Reading Procedure (Manzo, 1975). Thus, students are provided choice with some structure. These lessons typically focus on broad discussions about the topics based on the students' experiences, interspersed with reading segments of texts. Often groups are facilitated by preservice teachers from Purdue University who are engaged in a field experience related to their content literacy course.

Many of the topics students choose to read come from periodicals such as *Current Events*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and the *Journal and Courier* [local newspaper]. During the sustained silent reading/writing time that marks the first 20 minutes of each 92-min class period, students read Literacy Lab materials but also bring in trade books, magazines, textbooks, and class assignments.

In small group and individual work students respond in writing to narrative or expository texts teachers or their peers have written. They write predictions and endings of stories or segments of branched fiction stories started by other students or teachers. All of these activities foster individual creativity. Some of the activities can be completed in a class period and others may take several class periods to complete. Students select assignments in which they write and illustrate reports about people or events important to them using computer graphics and drawing tools. At times they develop narratives or informational texts after reading similar texts. For example, after reading about topics in *Current Events* or *Newsweek* students have written about teen pregnancy, smoking, crime, gangs, and the impact on adolescents of violence in television. Students also write stories about themselves, their friends, or family members; for example, Deanna, an African American student, wrote a piece of historical fiction in which she cast her mother as a slave on a plantation.

A set of assignment guidelines specify the development of multimedia productions to be shown to the class upon completion. Within this category Tom and Ernie, following extensive research, designed a "home page" on football quarterback Jim Harbaugh in which the user could read about his career, see pictures of key plays, and even access motion video clips of plays with narration. Their example led to a flurry of home pages about a wide range of topics students were interested in researching. David chose to write about a student clique of skateboarders. He planned his project to reflect skaters' perspectives about the way they were viewed by peers and adults and integrated text with video clips from a documentary about skaters. As a break from work on these longer projects, students often select short assignments. For example, in "Get the Picture" they access a file we compiled of a wide range of digitized photos and they write about their feelings or reflections cued by each picture.

These examples reflect only a small portion of the range of activities. Each day we require that the students do the best they can on the activity they choose. At the end of each day, we check each student contract sheet to see what they proposed and what they actually accomplished. We initial each contract for that

day, noting the work completed. It is almost impossible for students to fail. The emphasis on a wide range of flexible tasks, coupled with a focus on process— completing the work contracted for the day rather than focusing on relative ability—instills confidence. The students know they can succeed and that we expect success as routine. Most important, they know that we *care* that they succeed.

In the first year of the project, we constructed more tightly structured assignments based on our belief that the students would loose track of their progress unless assignments were laid out in a linear order with clearly articulated steps. In addition to the structure or outlined assignments, we wrote branched fiction stories in which a story we had started would be completed by individual students, pairs of students, or students moving from one computer to another. As more computer equipment became available, we moved more toward multimedia projects that permitted much more freedom in terms of choice of topics and the form the products would take. As students explored various assignments and produced products from them, we encouraged them to publish their work in "Class Library," a location on the file server in which the completed work could be saved where peers can access and respond to one another's work.

Below is a brief synopsis of some of the assignments that we used during the 1995–1996 academic year. Following the synopsis are student examples produced from some of the assignments.

Youth Forum. This was a production of the *Indianapolis Star* newspaper in which students were to write letters of about 200 words to the newspaper commenting on current issues important to adolescents. Before writing on a topic, we usually asked the students to plan an argument to support their opinions and develop facets of the argument. Some of the topics the students chose to write about were teen pregnancy, gangs and gang violence, living with divorced parents, violence in the media, cheating in school, smoking, premarital sex, and song lyrics. Tom wrote a Youth Forum piece about song lyrics:

> Many songs that appeal to teens contain bad words and references to violence and sex. Most people listen to music with bad words because they are gang members, skaters, cool people. The reason they talk about their life in the hood is because that's their life. Lyrics do not affect people's behavior. I grew up in a bad neighborhood downtown in Detroit, Now there are drive by shootings about 15 minutes in my old neighborhood. Parents should be able to let their kids listen to any kind of music.

Movie/TV reviews. For this assignment we included a sample review as a reference and asked the students to read the example looking for a summary, information about where the movie is playing (or network scheduling information for TV productions), and comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the production. They were then directed to follow the guidelines to review their own movie. Krista wrote a review of the film, *Iron Will*:

> WILL AND I ARE ALIKE IN TWO WAYS. WE ARE BOTH ALIKE BECAUSE IN THE MOVIE WILL SHOWS HIS LOVE FOR THE DOGS BY CARING FOR THEM, FEEDING THEM, AND MOST IMPORTANT THING IS THAT HE GIVES

> THEM LOVESO IN PART I LIKE DOG BECAUSE THEY ARE REALLY CUTE LOVEABLE FRIENDLY ALSO THEY PROTECT YOU WHEN YOU ARE IN THROUBLE AND HURT

Krista diverges greatly from the guidelines and writes how she and the protagonist, Will, are alike. She sees herself as a loving, caring person like Will.

Get the picture. We created a thumbnail sketch section of the assignment in which students accessed a "People" file on the network file server that included dramatic digitized photos of people in various settings. Students write about the person in the picture—where the person might be from, what the person does for a living, what are the person's interests. We also included a "What's Happening" assignment in which students accessed an "Events" file of digitized pictures of events in various settings. Students write about the context of the photo, what they think was happening before the event in the picture, and the story behind the picture. Finally, we included a "Describe the Scene" file of digitized pictures of interesting places. Students describe the scene, talk about what happens in each place, and discuss the sights and sounds at the place. Darrell contributed the following piece to the "People" file.

> This is a picture of Mr. James Jackson. He is an African American who is an actor. His on TV shows, and he is in his late fifty's. He is a wealthy man and grew up in a family of 7. Jackson's most famous commercial is when Jackson and Cosby were ever to do the first commercial on Pepsi. Bill Cosby and James Jackson are step cousins and he became a movie star in 1964. In his spare time he likes to play cards and he like's to play Jazz. Mr. Jackson had a heart attack when he was 83 years old.

Guess who? In this assignment students choose a person to write about. They start with notes representing what they already know about the person and decide what else they want to know about the person. They then locate resources that include information about the person (books, magazines, CD-ROM references, World Wide Web) and write a short synopsis about the person. When the work is done, they get a peer or teacher to edit it. In its final form, students save the "Guess Who" file to the "Guess Who" folder on the file server. Peers read the text and write their guesses at the bottom of the file so authors can see the range of guesses.

Benita starts off in the typical public literate fashion by telling the reader what assignment she is doing. But she sidesteps the guidelines of writing about a well-known person using reference tools and, like much of her writing from the menu assignments, writes about her love interest.

> I'm writing a paper on a person. I'll tell you what's so special about this person, but first I'm going to describe this person. This person is a male with light brown hair like and he's tall, with blue eyes, so yes he is a white male. What makes this person so special is he is very funny and also very bright and very, very sweet. He makes me laugh whenever I need it even when I don't. He's a very good friend and I guess I do trust him okay well maybe I do and I believe in him too. Whenever this person needs a friend I'll always have his back. No, matter what happens we will always be good best

friends! Just a reminder the reason why I'm writing this paper to prove to him I do care and that I do trust some certain people maybe not even that much but I still trust some certain people. But most of all I Luv him very much.

Write a story. This assignment has functioned as a sort of catch-all of expressive writing on topics of the students' choosing. Within this category students have written poems, short stories, or ongoing narratives in which they have written for months.

Deanna used the genre of a sort of historical fiction to tell a story about herself and her family. She constructs her cultural heritage through the language she uses to tell the story. This is an excerpt from a longer narrative:

ONE HOT AFTER NOON DAY IN MISSISSIPPI MA WAS WALKING HOME FROM WORK. SHE IS A MAID FOR THESE PEOPLE THAT LIVE IN THIS BIG WHITE HOUSE ACROSS TOWN. SHE WORK HARD FOR THEM REALLY SHE DOES, BUT THEM FOLKS JUST DON'T PAY HER THAT GOOD. WHY? I DON'T KNOW. SEE US FOLK NEEDS MONEY IT'S SIX CHILREN COUNTEN ME. BUT ANYWAY. SOMETIMES I WISHED I WAS DEAD CAUSE MA DON'T GET PAID NO MONEY DADDY GOT CUZ HE WAS MESSEN WIT A WHITE LADY YOU AREN'T TREATED FAIR EITHIER. IT STILL FEELS LIKE WE IN THE SLAVE DAYS AND WE NOT. US COLOR FOLK SUPPOSE TO BE FREE AND TREATED EQUAL, BUT THAT AIN'T THE CASE HERE.

Class post office. Although the post office is not an assignment per se, it is an ongoing activity that students participate in. They can write notes to their peers in the Literacy Lab. We tell them that we monitor what they write but that they can write anything they want "within reason." They save the files to a location on the file server called Post Office and we transfer the files to the appropriate mailbox of the student they are written for. Yolantha wrote this note to her friend Deanna:

Hey,

Deanna wuz up? well I'm just cillin. Anyways so who is carson? is he the boy we saw at the mall? the one that was talking to sara? Girl you know that sara is going with newatoo(sorry spelled wrong)? And kisha is going with Bart! isn't that something? Girl remember chico the boy I went with well I broke up with him cause he was messing around he makes me so sick. Anyways when you do go to Nap I'll ask my mom to visit you and see the fine men. Well I talk to you later cause the bell is about to ring.

see you later

Yolantha

Integrated media projects. These projects are the most involved assignments. Students select a topic they want someone to *learn about, how something works, or how to do something*. Depending on the primary product or presentation form, students sketch out storyboards (for example, with slide shows) of what each frame includes, outlines for text segments. Students then collect the various forms of media they have decided to use. We ask them to develop texts by using reference tools like printed materials, CD-ROMs, and on-line services. We also encourage them to use a variety of graphic media including existing graphics like clip art and to create graphics using draw tools. If they want to use pictures

we encourage them to take pictures with a digital camera or scan pictures using a flatbed scanner. They have to set up a file management system for the information. For example, they may have a folder for scanned pictures, one for motion videos, another for text files. The bottom line on the projects is that they must contain a variety of media of which text is one type.

Generally, Mark spends little time reading or writing in the lab. On a few occasions, however, he wrote small pieces of text fashioned around pictures he scanned in from the flatbed scanner. His end-of-the-year project was on old cars, a topic he is constantly talking about. He scanned in about fifteen images and wrote an introduction.

CAR'S

> I like to drive a lot of car's. I have spellsoly the older car's just like the one I have in the book that you will read and look at. I will tell you a littel about them down the paper.so read and hoffly you will like it so read it.

Mark struggled to write the introduction. He spent the bulk of his time scanning images, editing the images, and showing his peers and us what the digitized pictures looked like.

The Literacy Lab Students

Students in the Literacy Lab are from grades 9 to 12 and have been administratively enrolled in the innovative program rather than choosing it as an elective. The students enrolled in the program have been labeled as at-risk due to one or more of the following criteria: (a) they are within a range of the lowest 5 to 8% of reading achievement in the school according to standardized achievement testing (the state mandated test); (b) they are incoming freshmen who scored below frustration level in three subject areas on content reading inventories we constructed of materials included in the freshman curriculum; (c) they are currently placed in the basic track (the lowest track) coming into the high school; (d) they have been referred by guidance counselors or teachers; (e) they have been identified through special education assessment as mildly handicapped (usually Educationally Mentally Handicapped or Learning Disabled) with a particular deficit in language skills. The proportion of minority students and students from poor families (according to federal eligibility requirements for free and reduced lunches) included in the program is proportional to the larger school population. Hence, about 4% of the enrollees are African American and Hispanic students and about 29% of the students are from poor families.

Based on our work at Jefferson High School, we constructed a working definition of the at-risk students we work with, which is as follows: *students who have been identified by teachers and other school officials for special treatment or placements due to low academic performance, poor motivation, or social actions deemed inappropriate within the predominant school culture.* We cannot, however, broadly apply all facets of this definition to all of the students. Some of our students with low literacy performance are generally successful in academics; some of the students are competent readers but are referred to special programs because they are different than the

mainstream social group; many reside outside of the mainstream academic culture and its associated social network. In discussing these students, we also acknowledge the complexity of social, emotional, socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and medical definitions offered to explain "at-riskness" (O'Brien & Dillon, 1995). Most of the students have had negative experiences in school and many of them are not motivated to engage in many school tasks. About 20% of the students drop out of high school when they reach 16 years of age.

We constructed academic histories of ten students. The academic history interviews provided us with insights about the students' current family and work lives, future aspirations, experiences in school, and the values and beliefs these individuals hold regarding life within and outside of school. The interviews also informed us about these students' reactions to the Literacy Lab and activities. Of the ten students we interviewed, five are from two-parent homes, two live with a mom and a stepdad, two live with their mom, and one lives with his father. Seven of the students hold jobs (two in health care positions, three in food service, one in a flower shop, one baby-sitting); one student recently quit from a job at the Dairy Queen, and another works informally modeling cosmetics. Only one student was not working. The students indicated that work is a large part of their lives; their social life is centered around work and they spend an amount of time at work equal to or greater than the time they spend at school. We found that the students view work as more purposeful than school because it meets their goal of becoming adults and earning money to gain independence, particularly freedom from school and from their parents.

The vocations of the students' parents strongly influence the students' future job aspirations as well as their attitude toward and work ethic within the Literacy Lab. For example, four male students related that their dads are truck drivers or mechanics; these male students, in turn, value these activities. In fact, several of the students were serving in apprenticeship roles with their parents or other significant adults and planned to continue in these jobs as vocations (e.g., car mechanics). The fifth male student interviewed planned to go to nursing school because his mom is a nurse. Several of the males believe that learning to read and write could help them complete school or do well in future schooling; others noted that truck drivers do not need to do well in school to make a living. Four of the five girls interviewed were selecting vocations based on the popular media: model, actress, cop, fashion designer. One girl plans to open a day care center modeled after her aunt's business where she works during the summers. Again, several students noted that reading and writing would not be central to their future work (actress, model), whereas others felt that they would need to be able to write but in limited ways (e.g., "a cop needs to be able to write out a traffic ticket").

The information we gleaned from interviews allowed us to select materials for use in the Literacy Lab that tapped students' interests (e.g., car and fashion magazines). We also encouraged students to talk about and bring in materials from work to read or write about. We began to understand why several of the

students find many traditional literacy activities irrelevant to their lives, primarily because these tasks seem unrelated to those students engage in at work or those they believe they will engage in in the future. These students are interested in exploring topics about their own culture or about kids like themselves. They also enjoy articles about popular culture and are drawn to materials that are typically viewed as unusual or bizarre. Students view computers and other forms of technology as novel, relevant ways to learn with software and other materials that allow them to connect their backgrounds and future aspirations with school work. Traditionally, at-risk students are rarely those individuals privy to using technology in school settings.

Three Cases Illustrating Program Characteristics

The following vignettes illustrate specific examples of the three program characteristics: viewing students as unique individuals; providing students with tasks that are challenging, interesting, and "do-able"; and allowing students choice in topic and method of completing activities. An example of providing students with a challenging yet interesting task is evident in the vignette below where two students, Lynn and Denise, work on a CD-ROM based mystery game, Magic Death (Gilligan, 1993). Lynn has shown little interest in reading. Denise reads to get school work done but hasn't been really interested in it.

> Denise liked the idea of solving a mystery and is interested in police work when she finishes high school. Lynn joined her in a collaborative effort because they are friends. The CD-ROM contains difficult text, but each day the two worked on it, they made progress toward solving the mystery by dividing up tasks. They prompted each other to look for information from the victim's desk, phone records, the autopsy report, and non-testimonial evidence such as profiles of prospective suspects. Lynn became increasingly adept at recording the information in a notebook that is part of the game as well as on another sheet of paper. Denise continually prompted Lynn with questions they still had not answered from various sources of evidence. Although they found the game difficult at times, they experienced enough success because of the number of options to make consistent progress in solving the crime. The whole time they worked on the game they were reading, discussing events, and writing. (Vignette, October, 1995)

In this vignette Lynn and Denise show us what literacy engagement looks like when they become totally engrossed in solving the crime posed in the CD game. They talk about the clues and evidence, write copious notes, and read a large amount of text from the screen. Moreover, the two students want to engage in this activity over an extended period of time because they find the task fun and challenging, yet do-able.

In the Literacy Lab we place few limits on the topics students may select or the purposes for which they may read and write. We suggest to the students that they write about topics acceptable within the guidelines set by school. An example of students working together on a topic of their choosing, yet one which pushes the typical boundaries of acceptable topics for

writing, is evidenced in the following vignette. Joe and Greg are working on a character sketch. This is used as a precursor to a story. They discussed a few ideas and chose to develop some sort of female space alien as the protagonist in their story. While they discuss the possibilities, they explore how risqué they can be with the physical features of their character, and still get away with it.

> *Greg*: [Give her] a belly-button ring.
>
> *Joe*: Maybe that's too risky.
>
> (They mute the mike with the mute button while they start to discuss the heroine's tattoo.)
>
> *Greg*: Most women get them on the shoulders—on the back of their shoulders.
>
> *Joe*: No, we will say she has a tattoo right here (pointing to his face and cheek).
>
> *Greg*: Naw. You've got to make her fairly attractive. If she's built—thin and built—and wears tight clothes. . . . Hey! (Greg calls out to one of the preservice teachers.) Where do women usually put tattoos? (He asks Don, a preservice student working in the classroom.)
>
> *Don*: Umm, are you guys kidding? (nervous laugh) Well, my girlfriend has one on her left breast.
>
> *Greg*: H-m-m. We were thinking left buttock, but breast makes it more interesting. (Vignette, October, 1995)

Joe and Greg have selected a topic of interest to them and they work diligently to write a story. The thrill of writing about a taboo topic like the placement of tattoos is fun and actually leads them into the creation of a well-developed story that took several weeks of high quality work time to complete.

In the second nine weeks we provide a less structured menu of possible projects. Some of these activities can be completed in one or two class periods. However, students who become really interested tend to work on projects longer, dividing a project into manageable goals over a multiple-day contract. Many of the projects become complex, integrated media projects. For example, in the following vignette Kristy chose an option on the activity menu to write about a person. She chose this option because she was preoccupied with the death of Jerry Garcia, the former leader of the Grateful Dead rock band. She had been a fan for some time, listening to the band's recordings, reading stories about them, and pasting their various symbols on her *Broncho Board*, a school calendar used to record school events and her weekly activities.

> Kristy decided to write about the Grateful Dead using San Francisco font and she inserted digitized scans of the various symbols in her text. She interspersed pictures throughout the composition that chronicled some of the band's history and ended the piece with a scanned photo of Garcia laying on his couch, smiling at the photographer and holding one of his guitars. When we asked her about why she picked the project she told us: "Jerry Garcia is my favorite singer. Since he passed away I think of him a lot. And I always wanted to write about him. This [activity] gave me a chance to write. The pictures [in the text] show the stages he's been through until the day he died. Here's one [picture] where he's singing, and he's kind of laid back and resting." (Vignette, November, 1995)

In this vignette Kristy selected a topic and wrote about an issue she found authentic and meaningful. She noted that the activity gave

her a chance to write about something important. She was also able to flexibly choose how she would represent her ideas, both in text and pictorial form.

Students' Perspectives on the Literacy Lab

In the following section we present students' assessment of the Literacy Lab program. Students' comments, based on responses to interview questions about the lab, are used to continually refine the materials, activities, and general routines in the lab—all in an attempt to better meet students' needs.

Question #1: What kinds of activities do you work on in the Literacy Lab? The students identified the following as Literacy Lab activities: computer programs and games, groupwork, sustained silent reading, and individual work. The list generated by students was inclusive of all activities designed especially for them. The students noted that they "type on computers," "mess around with CD-ROMs and games," "check out the computer and search things," and "do multimedia stuff and projects." The students mentioned computer activities most frequently, followed by groupwork, when describing the new literacy program. Only two participants mentioned individual work or sustained silent reading. None of the interviewees commented on activities in which they work with teachers, either in a one-on-one format or in small groups, despite the daily occurrence of these activities.

Question #2: What activities do you enjoy the most in the Literacy Lab? When noting activities they like, students place the most value on those activities that allow them the widest variety of choice. Students favor activities that are fun and purposeful, and those that are achievable and promote understanding. They also prefer tasks that they view as helping them learn to read and write more proficiently. With reference to the importance of choice and variety in activities students stated, "You get the choice to work on computers or in groups." "We get to pick our own projects." "We learn different things everyday." The students also noted that they enjoy class and find the activities purposeful and achievable. They commented, "Class is fun." "I like it—it's easy." "I love to read and write." "On the computer you read and write—I like writing stories. I like 'Beyond the Wall of Stars' [a CD-ROM game] and story endings."

The students also appreciate the opportunity to work on literacy skills while simultaneously completing an assignment for another class. One student noted: "I can do a report for another class and get credit for working on it." He views the Literacy Lab activities, particularly reading and writing on the computer, to be purposeful in relation to his work in other classes. From these comments it appears that students view computer activities as motivating, meaningful, fun, and intellectually stimulating. The students are more willing to spend time working on the computers, thus reading and writing more than when they were working with more traditional paper and pencil activities. Even though the students identified individual tasks or sustained silent reading as salient activities, they did not describe these as their favorite activities.

Question #3: Do you have any suggestions for improving the Literacy Lab? Despite stating

that they liked computer work, small group activities, and other reading and writing tasks, the students disliked these activities when the class climate was not conducive to such work or on days when they weren't in the mood to work. One student responded, "Some of the projects we have to do I have a hard time with . . . we only have certain class periods to do them in. Sometimes they can be boring." Another student protested, "Groupwork—I hate it because we have to read—it gets boring and we talk about stupid stuff." A third student noted, "Silent reading . . . gets kinda boring." Another student said, "I don't like the groupwork unless I like the person having us do it." And yet another student admitted, "Some days I like it [Literacy Lab activities], some days I don't."

We believe that the students' responses were typical of many adolescents who refer to any school work as boring. Further, patterns in students' responses indicated that the answers to this question were idiosyncratic, depending on whether the student was successful at an activity or liked the other students with whom they worked. However, we took many comments to heart when revising activities.

Question #4: Do you think you are improving your reading and writing because of the Literacy Lab and if so, how? The students stated that the Literacy Lab activities help them become better readers and writers. One student noted, "The pictures and searches [on the computer] help you understand it [the text]—it is more interesting." Another student commented on how groupwork contributed to her reading ability: "In groups you read—it helps to hear other people's opinions." Another noted that class activities "help you get prepared for what's going on in the world," and yet another boasted "now I am able to go home and actually read a book and be proud of myself." Students also related: [I am] "taking more time and reading stuff instead of going through it and trying to get answers." Another student believes that she is "improving in comprehension a little bit—I'm understanding more of what I read." Several students noted that they were reading and writing more and thus "the more practice, the better you get." Only one student commented that the Literacy Lab was not helpful to her literacy development. She noted, "It didn't improve my reading and writing—all we did was work on computers."

We interpret the last comment above to mean that some students may view reading and writing in a more traditional sense (reading textbooks or skill sheets and writing answers to questions). Thus, the applied projects students engaged in, in which texts were read and written using computers, may have masked the tasks of reading and writing.

In sum, when looking across the responses to the four interview questions, all students except one found the Literacy Lab activities to be enjoyable and helpful in their development as readers and writers. Students especially like the computer activities in which they can read and write stories. They like the small groupwork if members of the group are people they like and if the teacher-leader is acceptable. Activities that are perceived as too hard, or where time runs out before the activity can be completed, can result in students labeling the task as "boring," "difficult," or "stupid."

Conclusions

The perspective we have taken on engaging at-risk high school students is, we believe, more valid than the historically grounded practice of labeling marginalized students and placing them in special programs in which they follow specific education plans based on psychometric tests. Instead, we work to maintain their engagement from day to day by capitalizing on their free choice and balancing their daily challenges and success through the use of tasks that are possible by using technology tools typically reserved for high track, more privileged students.

Our work thus far in developing academic histories of students illustrates how traditional programs marking their years of schooling have diminished the students' self-worth as they face tasks they believe they are incompetent to attain (Covington, 1992). By high school, the result can be devastating. The data also indicate how as educators we forget about students' lives outside of school and how much more tangible those lives are than the curricula we offer them. The same data, however, show the efficacy of enhancing literacy engagement by shifting the students' attribution of success from ability-based goals to flexibly designed task goals and choice. Our work at Jefferson High also accentuates the advantage of getting to know the students, realizing the false security we have in labeling them, and designing a program based on their lives outside of school grounded in their popular culture.

Through the development of an innovative literacy program we continue to critique traditional notions of "at-riskness" that place blame on students or their families (e.g., environment *predisposes* students to failure in school) and focus more on the culture of schools—a culture that unintentionally through its institutionalized curriculum and organizational structures *places* students at risk (Kos, 1991). Further, we believe that classroom teachers and administrators typically view at-risk students as incapable of regulating their efforts in class or working on challenging materials. Using data from studies like ours we can show teachers and administrators what at-risk students can accomplish if provided the resources and nurturing environment. We do not intend our program to be an oasis of success in a desert of traditional instruction. Rather, we have started with a manageable program that we intend to integrate into a schoolwide program by continuing to provide extra support for students in danger of failing or dropping out of school and working with their regular teachers and administrators to integrate some of our insights into curricula across the disciplines.

References

Allington, R. L., & McGill-Franzen, A. (1993). Placing children at risk: Schools respond to reading problems. In R. Donmoyer & R. Kos (Eds.), *At-risk students: Portraits, policies, programs, and practices* (pp. 197–217). Albany, NY: State University of New York.

Allington, R. L. (1994). Critical issues: What's special about special programs for children who find learning to read difficult? *Journal of Reading Behavior, 26*, 95–115.

Apple, M. (1988). *Teachers & texts: A political economy of class & gender relations in education*. New York: Routledge.

Apple, M. W., & Christian-Smith, L. (1991). The politics of the textbook. In M. W. Apple & L. Christian-Smith (Eds.), *The politics of the textbook* (pp. 1-21). New York: Routledge.

Alvermann, D. E., & Guthrie, J. T. (1993). *Themes and directions of the National Reading Research Center* (Perspectives in Reading Research, No. 1). Athens, GA: NRRC, Universities of Georgia and Maryland College Park.

Alvermann, D. E., & Moore, D. W. (1991). Secondary school reading. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research: Volume II* (pp. 951-983). New York: Longman.

Alvermann, D. E., O'Brien, D. G., & Dillon, D. R. (1990). What teachers do when they say they're having discussions of content reading assignments. *Reading Research Quarterly, 24*, 296-322.

Bitting, P. F., Cordeiro, P. A., & Baptiste, H. P. (1992). Philosophical and conceptual issues related to students at risk. In H. C. Waxman, J. W. de Felix, J. E. Anderson, & H. P. Baptiste (Eds.), *Students at risk in at-risk schools* (pp. 17-32). Newbury Park, CA: Corwin.

Boyer, E. L. (1983). *High school: A report on secondary education in America*. New York: Colophon.

Brause, R. S., & Mayher, J. S. (1991). Our students. In J. Flood, J. M. Jensen, D. Lapp, & J. R. Squire (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teaching the English language arts* (pp. 259-272). New York: Macmillan.

Covington, M. V. (1992). *Making the grade: A self-worth perspective on motivation and school reform*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Cuban, L. (1989). The 'at-risk' label and the problem of urban reform. *Phi Delta Kappan, 70*, 780-784, 799-801.

Dillon, D. R. (1989). Showing them that I want them to learn and that I care about who they are: A microethnography of the social organization of a secondary low track English-reading classroom. *American Educational Research Journal, 26*, 227-259.

Dillon, D. R., O'Brien, D. G., & Ruhl, J. D. (1989). From ethnography to collaboration. In J. Allen & J. Goetz (Eds.), *Qualitative research in education: Teaching and learning qualitative traditions* (pp. 1-20). Athens, GA: The University of Georgia.

Donmoyer, R., & Kos, R. (1993). At-risk students: Insights from/about research. In R. Donmoyer & R. Kos (Eds.), *At-risk students: Portraits, policies, programs, and practices* (pp. 7-35). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Eckert, P. (1989). *Jocks and burnouts: Social categories and identity in the high school*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Edwards, P. A., & Young, L. J. (1992). Beyond parents: Family, community, and school involvement. *Phi Delta Kappan, 74*, 72-80.

Foertsch, M. A. (1992, May). *Reading in and out of school: Factors influencing the literacy achievement of American students in grades 4, 8, and 12 in 1988 and 1990* (Vol. 2). Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics.

Garcia, R., & de Felix, J. W. (1995). The dropout issue in school reform. In H. C. Waxman, J. W. de Felix, J. E. Anderson, & H. P. Baptiste Jr. (Eds.), *Students at risk in at-risk schools* (pp. 43-60). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Gilligan, S. (1993). Magic Death. [CD-ROM Computer Program.] Portland, OR: Creative Multimedia.

Guthrie, J. T., Bennett, L., & McGough, K. (1994). Concept-oriented reading instruction: An integrated curriculum to develop motivations and strategies for reading (Reading Research

Report No. 10). Athens GA: NRRC, Universities of Georgia and Maryland College Park.

Juel, C. (1988). Learning to read and write: A longitudinal study of 54 children from first through fourth grade. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 72*, 437–447.

Kohn, A. (1993). Choices for children: Why and how to let students decide. *Phi Delta Kappan, 75*, 8–20.

Kos, R. (1991). Persistence of reading disabilities: The voices of four middle school students. *American Educational Research Journal, 28*, 875–893.

Manzo, A. V. (1968). *Improving reading comprehension through reciprocal questioning*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.

Manzo, A. V. (1975). Guided reading procedure. *Journal of Reading, 18*, 287–291.

McCombs, B. L. (1996). Alternative perspectives on motivation. In L. Baker, P. Afflerbach, & D. Reinking (Eds.), *Developing engaged readers in school and home communities* (pp. 67–87). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Mikulecky, L., & Drew, R. (1991). Basic literacy in the workplace. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research: Volume II* (pp. 669–689). New York: Longman.

Nicholls, J. G. (1989). *The competitive ethos and democratic education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nicholls, J. G., & Hazzard, S. (1993). *Education as adventure: Lessons from the second grade*. New York: Teachers College Press.

O'Brien, D. G., & Dillon, D. R. (1995, April). *Engagement and disengagement in a high school literacy program: Classroom contexts and students' academic and life histories*. Paper presented at the annual meeting, the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.

O'Brien, D. G., Stewart, R. A., & Moje, E. B. (1995). Why content literacy is difficult to infuse into the secondary school: Complexities of curriculum, pedagogy, and school culture. *Reading Research Quarterly, 30*, 442–463.

Ogle, D. (1986). K-W-L: A teaching model that develops active reading of expository text. *The Reading Teacher, 39*, 564–570.

Paris, S., Wasik, B., & Turner, J. (1991). The development of strategic readers. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research: Volume II* (pp. 609–640). New York: Longman.

Pugach, M. C. (1995). Twice victims: The struggle to educate children in urban schools and the reform of special education and Chapter 1. In M. C. Wang & M. C. Reynolds (Eds.), *Making a difference for students at risk* (pp. 27–60). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Ralph, J. (1989). Improving education for the disadvantaged: Do we know whom to help? *Phi Delta Kappan, 70*, 395–401.

Stauffer, R. G. (1969). *Directing reading maturity as a cognitive process*. New York: Harper & Row.

Stevens, L. J., & Price, M. (1992). Meeting the challenge of educating children at risk. *Phi Delta Kappan, 74*, 18–23.

Tyson-Bernstein, H. (1988). *A conspiracy of good intentions: America's textbook fiasco*. Washington, DC: Council for Basic Books.

von Glasersfeld, E. (1991). Knowing without metaphysics: Aspects of the radical constructivist position. In F. Steier (Ed.), *Research and reflexivity* (pp. 13–29). London: Sage.

Waxman, H. C. (1992). Introduction: Reversing the cycle of educational failure for students in at-risk school environments. In H. C. Waxman, J. W. de Felix, J. E. Anderson, & H. P. Baptiste Jr. (Eds.), *Students at risk in at-risk schools* (pp. 1–9). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

NRRC National
Reading Research
Center

318 Aderhold, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602-7125
2102 J. M. Patterson Building, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742